

## **CHAPTER-I : INTRODUCTION**

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The terms- rural leadership, rural development and equality in the distribution system have gained much currency in recent years. These are aptly repeated terms by the social planners, politicians, accademicians dealing with development and poverty amelioration programmes in rural areas. The terms are much interrelated and emphasis on one term automatically draws others into focus. The major part (almost 76% ) of India's population lives in villages. As such, any analysis on the development of India has become the analysis of the development of the rural India. But India is a huge country and any programme for the development of rural areas can not be run from the Centre alone. So, following the ideal of Mahatma Gandhi, the policy makers of India initiated the Panchayati Raj System to generate rural leadership from within the rural societies. All the developmental programmes which were introduced since 1951 (the inaugural year of the Panchayati Raj setup), have been implemented through these rural leaders. They may be selected by the Government or elected by the people, but they have to bear the load of rural development in India. So, any study on rural development automatically brings into limelight the study on rural leaders as the sucess and failure of various rural development programmes, in fact, largely depend on the nature of emerging leadership pattern. The present study will try to find the pattern of emerging rural leaders in West Bengal with special reference to Cooch Behar

District of the State.

### **1.1: History of rural leadership in India: British legacy and impact of land tenure system.**

The trace of rural leadership and panchayat in India can be traced in the distant past. Even in Vedic Period, the institution like panchayat was in existence<sup>1</sup>. To trace the background of rural elites in the recent past, we see that the *Zamindars* were the powerful body of intermediaries between the state and the people. The State authority stayed in a distant corner, where from the collection of taxes and revenue as well as administration was not possible. So, the state authorities installed Zamindars to collect land revenue from the people by repressive means. Thus the Zamindars and landlords become autocratic and dishonest.<sup>2</sup> This semiofficial position of the Zamindars gave rise to contradictions in rural areas. The Zamindars with their coactors like rich peasants took the whole share of beneficts.<sup>3</sup>

The same dual administration of rural areas ( one by State through its servants like *Fouzdars, Diwans, Tahasildars* and another by Zamindars) continued throughout the British Rule in India till the abolition of Zamindari system in India in 1950. The rural leaders as a phenomenon has a British legacy. The Britishers, for the benefit of their administration, had developed a middle class. This class brings the much needed money for the rulers from the farmers and kept their own share out of the proceeds of collection.

The introduction of different settlement of revenue administration in British India was same- a propertied class, who did not till the land, but accrued profits from it, emerged. This class, for many years, had been the spokesmen of all rural people in India. Even after the end of the British Rule in India, this class had even raised their status by filling up the vacancies of British Rulers.

After the abolition of Zamindari system in India, the Zamindars became the absentee landlords and became the power elites in Rural India. They manipulated the political and economic power in their favour through different democratic processes and bureaucratic institution.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the nexus between land and power in India started.

But, India is a vast country, and it has got major differences in the rural social structure in different parts of the country. The land tenure pattern of the country also differs. The ceiling on land tenure has been imposed and this policy has been implemented in some states rigidly, but in some states they could not be implemented in any sense of the term. As the power and authority in rural areas is dependent on land tenure pattern, the patterns of emerging rural leaders also differ in a major way, from one state to another.

The period of phased development of rural areas also ushered in a hope for the landed gentry class. The implementation of rural development comes through the

Community Development Administration or the Panchayati Raj Administration. These landed people became the key persons of development and administration termed them as 'prograssive farmers' which, in fact, disguised the negative side of the class.<sup>5</sup> Thus, these rural influentials have become part of rural administration in India.

### **1.2: Agriculture, Development and Inequality:**

With the growing dependence on agriculture, the agriculture has now become a complex set of human relations which involves interrelated set of social activities and social relationships. The whole set of questions like rural development, rural inequality, etc. revolves around agriculture and its adjoining system. The 76% of India's population live in villages and are, in fact, dependent on agriculture in one way or other. But, a considerable number of these people (almost 48% of the total population in India) who live in abject poverty and in below poverty-line-level of subsistence, are denied of some basic necessities of life. After more than four decades of different agricultural development programmes and development administration system, virtually, little improvement in lifestyle of rural people has been felt. The per acre yield of the agriculture produce remains far below the standard set by the developed countries inspite of the fact that a large number of scientists and professionals are engaged for the betterment. Any improvement in agriculture technology and seeds has come up, that has successfully been implemented by big land owners and rural rich classes only, because they are

only capable to do it.<sup>6</sup> So, the gap between the rural rich and poor has increased in practice and economic inequalities increased instead of being curbed.

The land tenure pattern of India also contributed towards widening the gap. In India, officially, a three-tier classification of the farmers has been made, namely, marginal farmers, small and medium farmers and large farmers. By adding two classes into this threefold classification-- the absentee landlords and the agricultural labourers, a clear picture of class stratification of the rural areas can be availed. The benefits which trickled for rural poor were engulfed fully by the landlords and the large farmers. The innovations, inventions and improvements are mostly aimed at the rural people who have the financial capacity to invest money for their inventions.

The advent of IRDP (Integrated Rural Development Programme) in development administration with a clear objective of equality in rural areas is an epoch-making event in the history of rural development in India. The IRDP as a model was propounded by Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP) and Asian Development Bank. The IRDP with NREP (National Rural Employment Programme) since 1980 have become the only national rural development schemes.<sup>7</sup> The huge inflow of money in rural areas has started through the Nationalised Banks.<sup>8</sup> The beneficiaries were selected by the rural power elites and the 'key persons' of the administration (who may be selected by

the administration or elected by the people). Thus an immense power has been vested with the rural elites who with their power, can change the life-style of the other villagers. To some up, it may be pointed out that to curb inequality, the administration has made a class or a group of people who are more equal than others in the rural areas.

### **1.3: Development administration and rural elites:**

The rural elites who emerged during the new era of development administration and planning, have become the focus of attention of Indian social scientists. "The grass-root leadership is the agency through which development work is carried out. They are also the innovators, carriers of new ideas, norms and values to the rural people. The success of Panchayati Raj institution depends largely on the quality of leadership available at the grass-root level. Political development and democratic growth depend on the local leadership and its functioning in the Panchayati Raj institution".<sup>9</sup>

Coming to the state of West Bengal, the relevance of the study of rural elite or emerging leadership in rural areas has acquired a significant place in rural studies in India. This has become more relevant after the Left Front Government in West Bengal announced the Panchayat General Election in June, 1978. The new Panchayat Act of 1973 provides three-tier Panchayat bodies instead of four-tier system as introduced in the Panchayat Act, 1950.. The Panchayat election of 1978

was an epoch-making move and it led to a vibrant rural leadership. The model has since been followed by some other states. The Panchayat General Election, 1978 was held with a lot of enthusiasm with twenty-five million voters. After that, Panchayat elections have been made four times- in 1983, 1988, 1993 and 1998.

It may be pertinent for any inquisitive person to raise his eyebrows about the identity, class character, and motive of these huge mass of people in rural Bengal who as elected Panchayat functionaries and are invested with huge power and authority by the Government. The new system also raised much expectation from different quarters, B.Chowdhuri puts it, "In India, at present, various efforts are being made from different levels to improve the rural economy where more than 80 per cent of population live. Various organisations like cooperatives, rural banks, panchayats, etc. have started functioning in the rural areas not only for agriculture and rural development but also to minimise socio-economic inequalities in the process"<sup>10</sup> The objective of the new Panchayati Raj set up in West Bengal are rural development, democratisation, and social change. The new panchayat functionaries whom the panchayati raj system in West Bengal has brought into limelight are, in fact, the emerging rural elites in West Bengal. The new system generated expectation that these emerging rural leaders will prove their ability as end-generating catalyst of a new transformation in terms of panchayati raj objective. "It is, therefore, relevant to enquire who are the elites in changing social milieu; in what way they acquire power; and with what motive

they weild it"<sup>11</sup>

It may also be relevant to enquire the extent in which the emerging rural leaders differ from the traditional elites, whether the traditional nexus between the land and power in rural areas is still prevalent in rural Cooch Behar, how far the value of the Panchayati Raj system is imbibed by the emerging elites and how far they will be able to cope with the developmental work in Cooch Behar, what role the formal and informal leaders play in bringing dynamism in rural development of Cooch Behar. It is in this context that this study deals with socio-economic background, the political orientation and its pattern, the development orientation of the emerging rural elites in West Bengal with special reference to Cooch Behar district.

#### **1.4: Main reseach questions:**

To sum up, the main questions around which this study revolves are as follows:

- a) The emerging pattern of leadership in Cooch Behar, the position of leadership in social, economic and political field; hierarchy and power structure of both formal and informal leaders.
- b) The relationship between the old and the new leadership pattern.
- c) The political ideologies of leaders and the role of ideologies in production relations.
- d) The role and functioning of various institutional bureaucracy and their relation

with the emerging leadership.

e) The role of leadership as a catalyst in rural development process and functioning of the leaders in the context of bureaucratic constraints.

f) The role of the informal leaders in the developmental process and curbing inequality.

g) Some projections of the functioning of formal and informal leaders in the whole process of social transformation, rural development and curbing economic inequality.

In this study, the greater importance is given to the panchayat functionaries; because, after the Panchayat General Election in 1978 in West Bengal, virtually no room is left for informal and the reputational leaders and all are engulfed by the panchayat set-up. Those elites who are outside the power structure, can be termed, following V.Pareto, as 'non-governing elites' and waiting their turn in 'circulation of elites' process.<sup>12</sup> In Cooch Behar, the caste as a factor of making leadership may not carry much weight, as the rural society in Cooch Behar is mostly homogeneous, i.e. Rajbanshi Community<sup>13</sup> is the numerically dominant community in all most all villages.

### **1.5: Review of literature:**

Studies on pattern and processes of making rural leaderships in India represent a comparatively new field of interest in social science research. Until very recent

past, the rural studies in India are holistic in their approach. The studies dealt with rural life as an organic whole where leadership facets are fused with the other facets of the society like caste, religion, etc. During the last few years the facet of rural leadership has been receiving individual attention from the scholars and as a result, commendable works have been done in this field of study. In this section of the chapter, an attempt is made to review the literatures available on rural leadership.

Abraham<sup>14</sup>, while classifying the studies in leadership in India has classified them in two phases based on the mode of enquiry: conventional and progressive. According to him, the studies in conventional phases are concerned with the the dynamics of leadership, i.e., village factions, caste hierarchy, economic status. Studies in the progressive phase, on the other hand, have taken into account the processes and dynamics of modernisation into consideration. Those dealt with the challenges to traditional leadership and documented the emergence of the new patterns of leadership.

Oscar Lewis<sup>15</sup> has studied the dynamics of rural leadership. He dealt with the nature and functions of 'factions' in a 'Jat' village. His study brought out significant correlation between leadership and family size and a positive relationship has been identified between family income and leadership.

Dhillon<sup>16</sup>, while studying leadership in a south Indian village, has classified leaders into 'primary', 'secondary', and 'tertiary' leaders. While former is essentially present in all most all social social functions and meetings, secondary leaders are the faction leaders and the tertiary leaders are those who represent small kinship units or a group of four/ five families. He identified the factors like social status of the family, inherited social position, size and wealth of the family, etc. as the main contributing factors for leadership. He also maintains that factors like age, hospitality, leisure time available, influence outside the village, etc improve ones position in the leadership structure.

A major breakthrough in the study of rural leadership came with the publication of an edited volume by Park and Tinker<sup>17</sup> which includes a number of papers on the various aspects of leadership in rural India.

Evelyn Wood,<sup>18</sup> in reviewing the published works on leadership studies has discussed the changes in the pattern of leadership.

Baji Nath Singh<sup>19</sup>, in his study, has identified the emergence of a new and young leadership. According to him, the transformation is the consequence of education, land reforms and democratisation. He found that the new leaders belonged to middle or younger age group who are adequately interested in community development projects.

John Hitchcock<sup>20</sup>, in his study in a north Indian village, has held that the caste as the basis of leadership in rural areas has been continuing, though lower castes also become conscious and eager for economic reforms.

Henry Orenstein<sup>21</sup> examined both 'formal' and 'informal' leaders in his study in Poona district. Informal leaders are further classified into 'sanctioned' and 'unsanctioned' types. He found that though persons of high status and reputation are elected to some formal position in the new panchayat set up, they tend to exercise their functional roles more in their personal capacity than make efforts to institutionalise it and informal leaders wield the real authority in a village.

Alan Beals<sup>22</sup>, in his study of a Mysore village found that though the traditional authority is losing its influence, no clear trends about the new leadership are noticeable.

McCormack<sup>23</sup> has identified three reasons for the decline of the power of traditional authority, a) secularisation of the villagers' outlook, b) the question-mark on the neutrality and good character of some of the village elders, and c) the waning interest on the part of important village leaders in their traditional role of arbitrator of village disputes. According to him, the change from subsistence farming to cash farming on the one hand and the increase of the extent of direct government interference on the other are two primary reasons

responsible for the growing importance of the factional leadership.

Bachenheimer's<sup>24</sup> study is mainly concerned with studying the role of village leaders. He observed that the wealth and high caste determine the shape of village leadership and within each caste the most important attribute of leadership is economic status.

Srinivas<sup>25</sup> has made a great contribution in the study of village leadership. He regards the concept of 'dominant caste' as the crucial for the study of village leadership. He observed that the dominant caste is functional for the maintenance of village community and also works as the reference point for the lower castes to improve their position.

Dube<sup>26</sup>, on the other hand, feels that the concept of dominant caste is not of much help, since only a handful individuals or families in a caste hold the prestige of status symbols, financial resources, and position of influence within and outside the caste group.

Wiser and Wiser<sup>27</sup> in their study also observed that "if caste precedence and economic power rest in the same men their leadership is assured. If the two qualities are separate, villagers follow the man who can grant or withhold their daily bread. Ordinarily we find this power resting with the twice born".

In the proceedings of 'International Round Table Conference on Emerging Patterns of Rural Leadership in South Asia'<sup>28</sup>, papers of Dube and Leela Dube, on the methodological problems and survey of contemporary literature on the subject, and papers on the results of the similar studies undertaken in the countries of the South Asia have been included. Rajani Kothari does the summing up in which he has presented the emerging trends against a cross cultural comparative perspective. These papers have covered structural, functional and behavioural aspects of emerging rural leadership.

Most of these studies overemphasized the attributes of rural leadership in term of ascription and achievement and discussed the leadership in terms of formal and informal and faction-oriented and unified leadership patterns. Not much light is thrown on the leaders' stand as the modernising agent, their attitude and values, their mode of communication, behaviour and function, and their perception of the changes in the society. Later, some studies dealt with the emerging pattern of leadership in view of the modernisation in India. These studies have attempted to investigate the changes that have brought about in the leadership pattern after the introduction of community development and Panchayati Raj.

Nagpaul<sup>29</sup> pointed out the factors like introduction of community projects, land reforms, decentralisation of local administration and adult franchise as the main reasons for transformation of leadership from traditional to modernity.

Prodipto Roy<sup>30</sup> has analysed the characteristics of the emerging leaders as a) high income and high living, b) members of a large family, c) higher level of contact with the village people and he considered that the age and caste no longer holds the determining position in making village leadership.

Andre Beteille<sup>31</sup>, in his study in the Tanjore village observed that upto 1940 the leadership was based on traditional factors like ownership of land, high social and ritual status, etc.. But, with the technological revolution in agriculture and with land reforms measures, the middle classes are assuming power on the basis of their numerical strength and their newly acquired wealth.

Ranga Rao<sup>32</sup>, in his study in Andhra village revealed that the village was dominated by the primary leaders, though a gradual growth of multiple secondary leadership was in the offing.

According to S.C.Jain's<sup>33</sup> study, people with little education were elected to various offices under panchayat set up. It was noticed that the Panchayati Raj organisations were captured by the unprogressive and irresponsible leadership.

Abraham<sup>34</sup> tried to explain that farm size, extension agency contracts, newspaper exposure, social participation are the important variables which can explain the variance in community leadership.

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S.N.Mishra<sup>35</sup>, in his study, has urged the sampling methods extensively for the selection of villages and identification of leaders in examining the leadership structure of village panchayats in Sewan district of Bihar. He dealt exclusively the structure of panchayats and its functionaries, that is, the formal leaders. According to him, panchayat leaders come from large and middle-sized families in high and middle income groups and the families with high social status.

V.M.Sirsikar<sup>36</sup>, in his study has devoted exclusively to the structural base of leadership, its functioning and psychological make-up of the rural elites. His study is based on field work in Satna, Aurangabad, and Akola districts of Maharashtra. He pointed out that the gap between the leaders and the people in general is very wide in terms of the wealth, land possession and property. The study also reveals that ideology has a feeble influence than that of power as a factor.

Iqbal Narayan, et al<sup>37</sup>, in their study has devised the sampling and other tools like Sirsikar. But in addition to positional approach Sirsikar, they devised also the reputational approach in selection of leaders. Their sample of one hundred and sixty-four elites include elected members of the Panchayat Samity, Zilla Parishad and the members of the Legislative Assembly who are the ex-officio members of these bodies. Their sample also included five reputational elites from each village panchayats. The study revealed that there were greater similarities within the elites in economic terms than there were between elites and the ordinary citizen. The

study suggested that the members of the elite groups have more resources than the citizens in general in social, economic and political terms and the elites of upper, middle and lower castes were financially better placed than the respective peoples of their own castes. They also pointed out that inequalities in rural areas were cumulative in nature.

Sarin<sup>38</sup> has attempted to study the pattern of leadership in the context of India's modernisation. The study has revealed that that the leaders are emerging from the younger age group. Leadership is distributed among the upper, intermediate and lower castes of the village and is not concentrated among the upper caste alone. Land, money, land ownership were important factors of leadership position and the educational level with exposure to mass media also strikingly high.

Numerous volumes of studies on panchayats have been done after Independence and throughout the four decades. The state of Rajasthan is a pioneer in this respect. Many studies have been there with astonishing results. In Bengal, on the contrary, not much work was done in this field of research. With the starting of the new panchayat set-up after the Panchayat General Election, 1978, the scholars have chosen this field as their main point of interest. P.Nath<sup>39</sup>, in his paper has done a commendable work by identifying the class character of the formal panchayat leaders. The Government of West Bengal is another contributor in this study. Various leaflets, pamphlets, study reports are published by the

Department of Panchayats, Government of West Bengal.

In north Bengal, very few works are available on the subject. Dr.S.N.Bhattacharya<sup>40</sup> is the pioneer in this field of research. The lions' share of the scholarly literature available in this field of research in north Bengal has come through his pen. He first tried to co-relate that the efficient rural leadership is the primary condition of proper rural development in this region. In the same line and following the guidance of Dr.Bhattacharya, Dr.S.D.Bandyopadhyay<sup>41</sup> has studied the Mainaguri Block of Jalpaiguri District and prepared his doctoral thesis on rural development and rural leaders.

Thus, an overall observation of these studies on this aspect of rural leadership in India has brought out the fact that the established position of traditional leaders is now on the decline, although in cases they continue to exert their influence in the community. Various socio-economic and political changes have affected their leadership and as a result some changes are noticed in the bases of leadership and methods of exercising power. All these observations are significant for any new investigation which has a objective of reviewing the role of the emerging leaders in the rural developmental process and thereby lowering down inequality among the groups in the socio-economic straticication.

### **1.6: Background and scope of the study:**

Cooch Behar district of West Bengal is the focal point of the study. It is one of the low industrialised and low per capita income district in West Bengal. In fact, the Government of West Bengal has declared incentives for developing industrial set up in this 'no industry district'. The communication system here is rated among the most underdeveloped districts in India. Since the reintroduction of Panchayati Raj system in West Bengal in 1978, the terms of rural development, poverty alleviation programme and Panchayati Raj have become almost synonymous. In this district also, primary task of the elected panchayat body has been to curb rural poverty and initiate proper rural development. It is expected that this study will be able to provide new insight in development administration in particular reference to Cooch Behar and West Bengal in general.

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